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A Manifesto for Voice

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Manifesto for Voice

If in literary circles a stalemate exists over voice, then in ethnographic fields the faceoff has hardly begun.¹

Ethnographers turn their attention to voice about as often as one of their members snags a National Book Award.² What would it mean to take voice seriously? Why might that be important for realizing our potential as public intellectuals? How might engaging in ideas about voice and following through in our writing practices build trust among our would-be readers?

Most ethnographers care about politics. In what follows I suggest that tending to voice is essential to enacting those politics. Writing practices can enable political commitments. They can also undermine those commitments. One way to be political is through a conscious and careful attention to voice. Such attention can also nurture public intellectuals.

Not long ago I found myself thinking deeply about how I was creating voice in my writing. I had ventured away from the familiar and comfortable place of academic writing into what felt like a necessary yet risky territory of blurred genres. My goal was to bring a distant world to life. The approach seemed necessary because the circumstances called me to stretch the limits of convention. It seemed risky because of how the

experiment might be received and whether the manuscript would ever be published. The further things went, the more I questioned my strategy yet the less I felt inclined to undo it.

One day, wise words from poet laureate Grace Paley came over the radio. As I pulled into my carport, Paley offered a poignant observation about writing and politics. National Public Radio journalist Terry Gross had asked Paley how her political activism, with women and the peace movement, entered her stories and poems. I grabbed the little yellow spiral notebook from my purse and jotted down her response. Paley explained that she didn't push her political views into her stories. She then offered this insight: "When you write, you really- what you do is you illuminate what's hidden, and that's a political act. So if I did, and I hope I did, illuminate the lives of women, of the women I knew who were alone with kids and all that, that was a political act" (National Public Radio 2007).

I would like to suggest that some writing illuminates what is hidden better than other writing. Some writing resonates more than other writing. A key element of powerful writing is voice. And yet as social scientists, each and every one of us has been disciplined. At one or probably numerous points along our long educational and academic journeys, we had the voice beat out of us. I argue that recovering voice and nurturing it in our ethnographic writing is not merely a necessary literary

technique but, more important, a methodological strategy for doing meaningful social science.³ Meaningful social science makes possible “ah-ha moments” that cultivate more desirable, equal and just social orders than exist in the present (Willis and Trondman 2000). Powerful writing gets people to listen.

Having the voice beat out of us is part of growing up in a country with middle-class literacy expectations, linguistic conventions, and standardized tests. As Gramsci (1971) wrote from prison, we’re all always conforming to one conformism or another. In that regard, not much has changed since the era of Italian fascism when he wrote his notebooks. Given the persistence of multiple pressures on us, it is important to reflect on these constraints concerning voice.

Thinking back to her childhood, Grace Paley referred to Hunter’s College English as “like a theft of my language.” Exams were conducted orally and, she believes, were designed to exclude immigrants. “People were going around like crazy trying to talk American” (National Public Radio, 2007). Paley’s characters gossiped and told stories that sounded just like people in the Russian-Jewish neighborhood of New York where she grew up. An ear for vernacular voices became her hallmark. Indeed, Paley told her students at Sarah Lawrence College that writers need two ears. One for the literary canon, i.e., the stories and poems you study in school. “But the other ear, which

is one of the most influential ears,..." she said in another NPR interview, "is the ear for the voice of the family, and the language of childhood, and the language of your streets, and the- and very specifically the ordinary language of your time, which though I use the word ordinary, is really always extraordinary, I think" (Ulaby 2007).

Ethnographers so often tune into those ordinary voices, and yet in their finished works fail to convey how extraordinary they really are. In what follows, I aim to make sense of what happens in the process of transforming life into text and to stimulate a remedy through a vigorous attention to voice. To that end, I discuss the meanings of voice. I address some controversies related to voice. Finally, I highlight the importance of voice in cultivating trust and my own experience with blurring genres in order to do just that.

Voice and meaning

In this essay, I use voice as a metaphor to stand for the human qualities of speaking that exist with far greater distinctiveness than written texts. Through intonation, pitch, volume, emphasis, and accent, the physical voice can convey a range of attitudes and dispositions. Tone, trembling, steadiness or speed can add other meanings. Infusing written texts with

voice is no easy task. "It's not that writing is poverty stricken as a semiotic system," observes writing and rhetoric theorist Peter Elbow (1994:xxiii) in the introduction to *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. "But writing has to achieve its subtleties with fewer resources."

What does voice mean in relation to written texts? Voice has come to mean a number of things. The most simple meaning refers to how a writer's words sound on a page. Another association pairs voice with a sincere and "authentic" self. This notion is very seductive and was quite popular in the 1930s when Brenda Ueland wrote her wonderful little how-to manual, *If You Want to Write*. Finding inspiration from the creative genius of William Blake, she offered a quasi-spiritual call to arms for writers that promised to cure the worst of human ailments. Of course today many writers, critics and anthropologists, in particular, cringe at the concept of an authentic self; authenticity is rather hard to accept for a generation that was bottle-fed on postmodern ideas of the self as always in flux, contingent on context, and always-already interpellated.⁴

The notion of multiplicity of voices also meshes well with an understanding of voice as dialogic. Common sense might lead us to assume that the most powerful voices are unitary ones--confident and sure of themselves--but recourse to the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin leads to a different conclusion. It is,

rather, the conflict embedded in voices, even within a single characters' speech, that creates dynamic energy and enables voice to become textured and capable of carrying the very resonance that allows words to defy the flatness of the printed page.

Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's poetics reveals the latter's skill at using dialogue in such a way to pump life into his characters, their consciousness, and their intentions. The key was Dostoevsky's ability to exploit heteroglossic properties of language for the benefit of his stories, which spoke to social themes of his day. Bakhtin uses the concept of heteroglossia to draw our attention to how words are loaded with history. Speech contains all sorts of lexical items and tones and value judgments ranging from "the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour." The point is this: "Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions" (1980:293). The implications are extensive for voice: if words are going to sound real, they're going to have to retain some of the traces of that long history and those intentions, which may very well be at odds with one another. After all, words are always half somebody else's. Claiming them as one's own requires struggle day in and day out.

As Bakhtin (1980:294) famously put it: "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intensions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process."⁵

Enhancing a diversity of voices is something that novelists value; indeed, it is a core dimension of their artistic practice and largely defines what they are about. If, as Bakhtin (1980:300) suggests, "the development of the novel is a function of the deepening of dialogic essence," and if this dialogic deepening is achieved through attention to voices in all of their varied and ongoing tensions, where does this leave the ethnographer?

Voice and controversy

The voice metaphor has attracted a good deal of controversy over the past several decades in anthropological, literary as well as activist circles. An ideological chasm separates those who, on one extreme, believe in the existence of an authentic voice that reflects the true self, and those who, on the other extreme, criticize such notions as nothing more than an illusion in a postmodern age in which there are only multiple roles and shifting selves. This dynamic has played out among

poststructuralists who, with Barthes (1977), celebrated the death of the author and warned that we not be "'fooled' by the writer's character or the music of his language" (Elbow 1994: xiii). Indeed, in a more recent essay, Elbow observes that it's pretty tough to find critical literary types arguing for voice; it's been discredited. But it hasn't gone away, either (Elbow 2007: 170). It lives on, perhaps secretly, in conversations teachers have with students, on web sites, in writers' groups, and the like.

How are we to square Paley's position that writing is political because it illuminates what is hidden with Barthes' argument that texts are not anchored but free-floating, slippery signifiers open to the play of myriad interpretations?

Anthropologists face some particular problems when it comes to issues of voice. First, we work in the shadows of the crisis of representation's legacy, best represented in the *Writing Culture* volume (Clifford and Marcus 1986). This crisis made us very aware of the uneven relations of power that infused anthropological projects. As the poet and essayist bell hooks reminds, the dead-author position ignores the fact that all authors were not equally able to speak in the first place. For hooks and others writing from the margins, "coming to voice" was a tricky act of navigation, creativity and politics. The commonplace position among teachers of writing, that voice

embodied "the distinctive expression of an individual writer," raised issues for hooks. As the only African-American student in her classes, when she would read a poem written in black Southern dialect, the teacher and students would praise her for using her "true," authentic voice. "They encouraged me to develop this 'voice,' to write more of these poems." She was troubled. She felt the comments masked racial assumptions about what her "authentic voice would or should be" (1994: 52).

Inspired by black musicians' versatility with musical voicing, she looked to poets who challenged the insistence of settling on one voice and, instead, embraced a dynamic notion of self, upending assumptions of universality and pushing a politics of difference. She did so powerfully. I remember reading her essays in graduate school. Unlike chapters in *Writing Culture*, hers resonated like heartfelt songs. Voice shot through them.

Anthropologists face a second problem to this first one of a hyper-sensitivity to power relations and representational politics. Our two ears suffer from a dissonance that rivals those of creative writers who must shift between literary canon and vernacular street speech. To rise to the rank of professional anthropologists, we have had to foster an ear for the theoretical canon. When we do our fieldwork, most of us must cultivate an ear for the vernacular in whatever setting we find ourselves. Our fieldnotes reflect those voices. But all too

often something happens in the process of translation and conversion. When we come home and write our dissertations, our journal articles, our books, the voices of theory end up trumping the voices of the vernacular.

The effect on readers is mixed. On the one hand, through our standard disciplinary practice of situating our works within the conversations of other theorists, who are typically more renown than ourselves, we increase trust through authority. We sound erudite. Our painstaking efforts at merging erudite with subjugated knowledge establish us as master challengers to the tyranny of "totalizing discourses" (after Foucault 1980:78-81; see discussion in Krause 2007). On the other hand, the way we write puts off non-specialists. Our audience shrinks. Our public profile withers. What happens? Beyond the tired explanation of accessibility, I would like to suggest that our writing strategies undermine the trustworthiness of our voice. Our rapid-fire sideward glances toward imagined critics stir up confusion in our readers, who do not necessarily anticipate the same counter-arguments. Only the similarly trained can possibly keep up with us. For many, our professional ventriloquism raises suspicion. It weakens the resonance of our voice. Those would-be readers sense gaps in our sincerity.

Voice and trust

People activate an unconscious trust meter when they read. They gauge whether the voice is tinny or sincere. Explains Peter Elbow (1994:xl): "Because our inferences about voice are subtle, they are rarely based on conscious deliberation: we usually make these inferences with the ear--by means of how the discourse 'sounds' or 'feels' or whether it 'rings true.'" In large part, "being there" has served to convince readers that ethnographers are trustworthy witnesses. Few anthropologists in the contemporary era, however, write in the friendly prose of Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, or Clifford Geertz. The postmodernist turn posed a major challenge to that. As we as a discipline wrote ourselves into concentric circles of theory, the stories we told became more and more impenetrable to outsiders. There was a direct correlation between the construction of a new theoretical language, practitioners' fetishization of that language, and the devastation of voice. Indeed, voice became designated to the cargo seat as newly minted Ph.D.s sought to hide their insecurities, and prove their stuff, through adherence to the new lingo. Typically, dense theoretical writing does not to get high marks in voice resonance.

Attention to voice among anthropologists has a deep yet marginal history. Those anthropologists who have ventured beyond the "facts" of science and into the realm of emotions to

strengthen their voice describe the endeavor as risky. A primary risk derives from the intellectual history of anthropology as a social science charged with cross-cultural sleuthing. Dominant expectations call for explanation and interpretation. Standards of impartiality have dominated the field and continue to do so despite numerous experiments. Anthropological thought has been solidly built on a foundation of scientific mores that include detachment and objectivity. Ethnographic writers who betray these norms risk undermining their credibility. Their work may be seen as unscientific and hence lacking in legitimacy.

Given the reach of scientism, it is perhaps no surprise that experiments with voice have come from various corners of the discipline. In the 1930s, while conducting fieldwork in Haiti, Zora Neal Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, acclaimed for its vernacular voice likely energized from her study of oral performances. Where ethnographers have ventured into the realm of fiction is perhaps expectedly where some of the most poignant examples of resonant voice have emerged. Kirin Narayan's (1999:136) "short history" of anthropologists experimenting with form mentions a number of heavy hitters who played with fiction: Elsie Clews Parsons' 1922 edited volume that included creative works by Franz Boas and Edward Sapir among others; Oliver La Farge's 1929 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Laughing Boy* based on fieldwork among the Navajo; Ella Deloria's

Waterlily written from her research and experiences as Dakota Sioux in the 1940s but not published until 1988; Laura Bohannan's, a.k.a. Elenore Smith Bowen, publication of *Return to Laughter* in 1954 based on fieldwork in Africa. More recent examples include Paul Stoller's (1999) ethnographic novel *Jaguar*, which brings to life the desires and heartaches of transnational African vendors who migrate to the United States but can never fully leave behind their former lives or selves. Tobias Hecht (2006) blurred fact with fiction in his book *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel*, begun as a straight research project on a street child in Brazil who grew up to be a transvestite prostitute, but finished as a collaborative project aiming to convey with compassion the inner lives of his characters.

In a different vein, the seeds of an experiment with voice were sewn in the burgeoning political economy school. Sidney Mintz's *Worker in the Cane* amplified the voice of his key informant, Don Taso, who narrated his own heart-wrenching life story as a toiling Puerto Rican laborer whose conversion to Pentecostal Christianity puzzled the anthropologist. In the contemporary era, say the past 25 years, what has really opened up a space for voice has been an insistence on affect and vulnerability. Let's face it. Detached objectivity doesn't lend itself to resonant voice. Consider singers. Certain singers move

me because the vocalist has something to say, has some soulful or lonesome quality in his or her voice that resonates. Writing is no different. It's pretty hard to have powerful voice without feeling. And it's impossible to have feeling if the rules of play dictate a detached scientist.

Criticism of scientific objectivity helped the cause though did not solve it. When Barbara Tedlock made her call to rethink the relationship between the anthropologist and her subjects, she made headway toward bridging an "unbridgeable opposition" (1991:71). The goal of her maneuver was to further ethnographic understanding, of the Other, through an anthropological Self willing to also look inward. This inter-subjective move was critical to addressing a contradiction that continues to loom over the anthropological endeavor: the expectation that field experience ritually turns anthropological "boys" into "men" but that those experiences should be checked at the customs counter since mature ethnographers do not dwell on embarrassing personal feelings but focus on objective data. Tedlock exposed that contradiction and the power imbalances it reproduced but this exposure did not usher in an era of widely resonant voices.

Inroads for the voice project have been paved in other places: Renato Rosaldo on emotion, Ruth Behar on vulnerability, Lila Abu-Lughod on poetics, Nadia Seremetakis and Paul Stoller on the senses, and of course Clifford Geertz on thick

description.⁶ In an influential and poignant counter argument to objectivity dogma, Rosaldo invoked personal experience two decades ago as an important analytic category (1989:11). His argument targeted the limitations of science and the possibilities of enriching empathetic understanding. Such strategies remain essential for sensitizing our ears to voice in writing. The opening essay in his widely read volume *Culture and Truth* served as a scathing critique of classical approaches to producing knowledge, particularly in a post-colonial context. He forcefully called upon his colleagues to explore the cultural force of emotions and demonstrated how passions animated certain forms of human conduct. Indeed, certain human actions cannot be sufficiently understood without bringing emotion to bear on analysis. He took his plea a step further when he persuasively showed how the life experiences of the ethnographer could enable or inhibit insights (1989:19). In the example of Ilongot headhunting, he made the case that rage mattered--a realization he only came to in light of the grief-provoked rage he experienced after his wife, the anthropologist Michele Rosaldo, fell to her death from a cliff in the Philippines. In bringing emotion to bear on the analysis, he enriched understanding and created a deep sense of empathy.

It is not that anything goes. Quite the contrary. Bringing emotion and personal voice to bear on research calls for no less

care than a drug trial. Put another way, it calls for the same caliber of care given when marshalling any kind of data to support insights and advance conclusions. A suite of ethical, aesthetic, and practical considerations come into play. In the *Vulnerable Observer*, Behar advocates for turning to a personal voice in writing but cautions against slipshod practices. The writer who ventures away from the shield of detached objectivity must go forward not naively but rather with a "keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world, and more importantly, the topic being studied" (Behar 1996:13). Self-revelation in and of itself is no guarantee of success—in terms of resonant voice or message. The surest recipe for failure is the poor use of the personal voice as when the writer leaves "unscrutinized the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed," writes Behar (ibid.). There has to be some justification for using a personal voice: "The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake." In the end, Behar (1996:14) suggests that "a personal voice, if creatively used, can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of navel-gazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues."

As I linger on this quote, an irony strikes me. My book *Unraveled: A Weaver's Tale of Life Gone Modern* pushes ethnography beyond its conventional limits in part to enliven serious social issues and in part to create aesthetic depth. The project blurs fiction and non-fiction. *Part One*, "History Imagined," is written in the form of a novel that follows the life of a protagonist who came of age in the shadows of a fascist regime that wanted babies. The story seeks to expose the cultural roots beneath the profound yet quiet revolution involving a shift from large to small families. Each chapter centers on a core experience from the protagonist's life as told to me in numerous interviews and conversations. From those stories and additional ethnographic as well as archival and library research, I imagined how history happened, setting scenes, developing characters, and structuring plot to achieve what Paley said about the point of writing: to illuminate what's hidden. *Part Two*, "Memory Encountered," follows my fieldwork in central Italy during the course of a decade. This part consists of straight narrative ethnography with a twist: It unravels what was behind one memory involving a bold tale of abandonment and family rupture that triggered a journey of sensual encounters with the past, with informal economies, and with the modern condition.

I was moved to blur genres because I wanted to take the reader to a place that straight-ahead academic writing could not get to. I wanted to bring a distant world to life. And I wanted the story to ring true. I felt that a conventional approach to writing ethnography robbed something precious from my protagonist and her story. It struck me as a form of thievery not unlike the Hunter's College English of Paley's recollection. In retrospect, however, I find it ironic that, in order to make the story "ring true," I resorted to a strategy that will likely raise suspicions among any number of colleagues. And yet perhaps it is no surprise that my search for voice resulted in boundary crossing. Observes Elbow (1994:xxxiv): "Resonant voice opens the door to irony, fiction, lying and games; indeed, it positively *calls for* those and other polyvocal or multivalent kinds of discourse." Blurring of genres, for me, was not merely an act of creation but also an act of love and of politics (after Dominguez 2000) to infuse voice and hence life into a particular world, to gain the reader's trust, and to get the reader to care about and identify with another time, another place, and other people.

Voice and ethnography

How do we intend to be public intellectuals if hardly anybody reads our work? Or if to make sense of our arguments, a

reader requires a Ph.D.? There's a problem with the approach that dominates our discipline. It's high time we quit being duped and face it. Elbow drives home the point that resonant voice and readability go hand in hand. "When readers hear a voice in a piece of writing, they are often more drawn to read it—and that audible voice often makes the words easier to understand" (2007:176). How, though, do we resolve the stalemate between those who coach us to seek our authentic voice and those who say such a goal is problematic and naïve?

Merging my experiences as writer and as social theorist, I suggest a third way: striving for a *strategically* authentic voice.⁷ My hackles generally rise whenever I hear the word "authentic." I tend to think that it's bunk that the self can be "authentic." As an anthropologist, I am skeptical of rigid claims of such a thing as an essential self. I've read too many theorists who convincingly demonstrate the sway of ideological conflict on vulnerable, shifting and desiring selves. If from *Webster's New World Dictionary* we take authentic to mean "genuine," as with an authentic antique, we hit a major snag. Such a quest for origins contradicts a postmodern sensibility of the self. If, however, we select the definition of authentic as "that can be believed or accepted; trustworthy; reliable," we may be moving our voice project in a productive direction. Surely writers want their readers to believe them.

In a strategic use of authentic voice, the writer makes use of his or her voice to serve a particular purpose. The writer believes in this voice. It is an appropriate and trustworthy voice for the occasion. It is not necessarily an easy or comfortable voice to achieve. Very likely the writer will have to cultivate this voice and arrive at it through patient nurturance and ample practice.

A strategically authentic voice should not be mistaken for a simplistic or unitary voice. The techniques that Bakhtin observes in Dostoevsky, one of the great masters of voice, may be instructive for ethnographers, not just for theoretical expansion but also for writing inspiration. Bakhtin draws our attention to a dialogic or polyvocal quality among as well as within certain voices. In this view, language is not the speaker's own but rather is ever populated with the intentions of others. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin (1980:291) underscores his view of language as a living expressive system in which differences constantly collide: "it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth..."

Writers are therefore always making choices about how to appropriate language and how to orient their texts. Because of

the pressures of science and the pressures to make conclusions with confidence, the tendency for many social scientists is to appropriate language in a way that strips out the texture. Many ethnographers represent their subjects' talk in pullout quotes that reduce the speaker to a singular, unambiguous entity.

Nuance and conflict are commonly eliminated in the service of science. This is a very different strategy from that of the poet or novelist, who welcome heteroglossia and linguistic diversity, finding that the dynamic does not weaken their writing but intensifies it (Bakhtin 1980:298). There is a tendency for social scientists to purge words of intentions and tones that are alien to them, to destroy the seeds of social heteroglossia embedded in the words, to clean up language, to sanitize it, to eliminate peculiar linguistic characteristics and speech mannerisms that might risk "detracting" from the essence of the point being made. It is a method designed for authority and efficiency. Or so we have been told. Yet at what cost to voice?

In the spirit of a manifesto, I would like to close with five practical writing suggestions for enhancing voice:

1. Keep it honest. This means writing from the heart and pushing the power of perception.

2. Keep it alive. By this I intend writing from the senses, not just the mind. Be like a sponge, absorbing everything so as to bring worlds to life when they appear on the page.

3. Keep it open to contradictions. If language is a living expressive system, shot through with polyvocality, differences must be allowed to collide. The contradictions, ambiguities, hesitations, and dysfluencies enliven text and keep the voice from going flat.

4. Keep it grounded. Context is essential and, of course, there are multiple contexts—from the local to the global.

5. Keep it present. Voice, according to Walter Ong (1994:20), “simply conveys presence as nothing else does.” In other words, it puts the reader in the moment. It cultivates trust.

Together, these strategies welcome resonant voices that, in Adrienne Rich’s words, “have the heft of our living behind them” (1986:68, cited in Elbow 1994: xxxiv). They contribute to the ever and always necessary project of illuminating what is hidden in ordinary lives and what makes them so extraordinary.

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¹ The characterization of voice as having come to a stalemate is discussed at length in Elbow (2007:171), where he states a goal "to wake up this slumbering contradiction."

² In 1988, Clifford Geertz received a National Book Critics Circle Award in the criticism category for *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*.

³ Bent Flyvbjerg's argument about making social science matter has influenced my thinking although he does not discuss writing or voice per se.

⁴ A fleshed-out discussion of these contradictory positions--voice enthusiasts versus voice critics--appears in Elbow (2007).

⁵ An application of Bakhtin's (1984) concept of heteroglossia to moral choices appears in Hill (1995).

⁶ Works that come to mind are Abu-Lughod (1986), Behar (1996), Geertz (1973), Rosaldo (1989), Seremetakis (1994), and Stoller (1994).

⁷ I am tempted to use the term "strategic authenticity," a play on Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism." She developed that term to indicate how strong differences may exist between members of various subaltern groups, but they may find advantages in temporarily "essentializing" themselves to put forth a relatively simplified group identity in order to act and achieve certain goals. A parallel here is that I am suggesting that certain types of voice do enable action. My critics might point out that a strategically authentic voice runs the risk of an oversimplified voice. Here, I suggest that Bakhtin's notion of dialogic voice be used to temper this possible tendency.